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## **Chelan, Douglas agencies win \$6,000 state award for collecting child support to help families leave welfare**

**WENATCHEE** – Agencies in Chelan and Douglas counties won \$6,000 for improved success in collecting child support payments for families working toward self-sufficiency.

The state award goes to the Chelan/Douglas WorkFirst Local Planning Area, a partnership of government agencies, nonprofit community organizations and other groups that help families leave public assistance and become self-sufficient. It recognizes the efforts of the Wenatchee Division of Child Support in collecting child support.

In 2000, the Wenatchee Division of Child Support (DCS) collected child support for 38 percent of families in Chelan and Douglas counties who receive welfare or were formerly on public assistance. Last year, it collected payments to help 46 percent of qualifying families in the two counties.

The office collected more than \$20.7 million between July 2000 and June 2001 on behalf of families in its service area, which covers Chelan, Douglas, Okanogan, Grant and Adams counties.

“We’ve worked very hard to locate non-paying parents and find ways to assure they support their children. The increase in local families receiving child-support payments means more children are being properly cared for, and less state money is needed to support those families,” said Debi Neuberger, a collections team supervisor at the Wenatchee office.

The Chelan/Douglas WorkFirst Local Planning Areas, along with other partnerships throughout the state, will be honored during a reception with Gov. Gary Locke on Dec. 20 in Olympia.

The award money will be used to help improve services for families participating in WorkFirst, the state’s welfare-to-work program. Possible uses include job fairs, WorkFirst staff training, family planning materials, events honoring employers and research.

“Child support is a vital part of helping families get off welfare,” said Julie Baker, who oversees Local Planning Area efforts from the Office of Trade and Economic Development’s headquarters in Olympia. “Chelan and Douglas agencies have worked together to help parents and children obtain the financial assistance they require to lead productive, well-adjusted lives.”

DCS works closely with other agencies, such as the Employment Security Department, WorkSource, and SkillSource, to assist noncustodial parents in obtaining long-term employment, and thus begin paying child support regularly.

DCS also coordinates efforts with county prosecutors. Tools such as license suspension, vehicle seizures and bank garnishments have been used to punish parents unwilling to arrange monthly support for their children. A website showcasing “most-wanted” non-payers is planned.

The number of parents receiving welfare grants in Chelan and Douglas counties has dropped nearly 44 percent since WorkFirst started, from 926 cases in January 1997 to just 521 cases in October 2001. Statewide, more than 145,000 participants have joined Washington's workforce since the program began. For more information about WorkFirst, see [www.wa.gov/workfirst](http://www.wa.gov/workfirst) on the Web.

**Contacts:**

Deanna Williams, Operations Manager  
Wenatchee Division of Child Support  
Work: (509) 886-6854  
E-mail: [dwilliam@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:dwilliam@dshs.wa.gov)

Julie Baker, Local Planning Area Coordinator  
Office of Trade and Economic Development  
Work: (360) 725-4135  
E-mail: [julieb@cted.wa.gov](mailto:julieb@cted.wa.gov)

Debi Neuberger, Collections Team Supervisor  
Wenatchee Division of Child Support  
Work: (509) 886-6832  
Home: (509) 884-5235  
E-mail: [dneuberg@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:dneuberg@dshs.wa.gov)

Adolfo Capestany, Community Relations Manager  
Department of Social and Health Services –  
Division of Child Support  
Work: (360) 664-5445  
E-mail: [acapestany@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:acapestany@dshs.wa.gov)

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